

# Adolescents are living digital lifestyles

Parents worry about future of kids who spend more time on screens than any generation

By Pamela Lannom  
plannom@thehinsdalean.com

Start reading about adolescents and screen time and the news isn't good.

Screen time can interfere with sleep, social skills and self-image. Tablets give kids instant access to Internet content that often is not age-appropriate. Cellphones arm bullies with a weapon that allows them to traumatize victims 24 hours a day.

If that's not enough to worry about, watch Anderson Cooper's "60 Minutes" report that aired Sunday, revealing how tech companies engineer apps to be addictive.

"It's overwhelming," said Dr. Cara Hurley, a Hinsdale parent and clinical psychologist in private practice. "The more I avoid it, the more anxious I am going to get."

So what is a parent to do?

Learn a bit about how the adolescent brain works and then apply the same sound practices of parenting that work in other areas of life, experts advise.

Hurley did not hesitate when asked if devices can be habit-forming.

"It's addictive," she said. "The neural pathways, the way it operates, they are the same neural pathways as drugs and alcohol."

The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders does not identify an addiction to technology, Hurley said.

"But we see it clinically," she added. "I think we're going to see this more and more if people are not thoughtful about how they model their own media use."

The pre-teen and teen years are a time when young people are wired to develop their identities and evolve as social beings. It's a time when friends come first, Hurley said, and social media helps facilitate that. It's just harder for parents to regular that process than it used to be.

"It's the same challenges," Hurley said. "It's just scarier for parents and my corded phone didn't come with me everywhere."

Once upon a time, parents could control most of what their children saw by keeping them out of restricted movies, said Roseanne Tenuta, a health educator at the Robert Crown Center for Health Education in Hinsdale.

"If a kid has a cellphone, especially a smartphone, they have Facebook, they have the Internet, they have email," she said. "It's very hard for us as parents to control that. They can pretty much get to anything they want to."

Another challenge, Hurley believes, comes from living in an affluent suburb like Hinsdale.

"We're in this town of keeping up with the Joneses," she said.

That means the acquisition of technology is not a question of if, but when.

"The neighbors got it. I want my kid to fit in. I'm going to make sure I have it, too," Hurley said.

Suzanne Wychocki of Hinsdale, parent of two in high school and one in middle school, believes educators can get caught up in a similar line of thinking. Her daughter, Maddy, ended up with a PTO-funded iPad in fifth grade for one main reason, she believes: "Everybody is doing it."

She isn't convinced the decision — especially since the iPad is not part of the middle school experience — was a good one.

"Show me the proof that this is making a better educational experience," she said.

She worries that her kids' ability to have fulfilling relationships could be hampered by the time they



Clinical psychologist and Hinsdale resident Cara Hurley said now more than ever parents need to help children learn to put down their phones and tablets and find balance in their lives. Spending time outdoors with her kids, Jonathan, 9, and Caroline, 6, at Peirce Park is one way to do that. (Jim Slonoff photo)

## Share your questions, advice

The final story in this series will include a list of suggestions for parents about managing screen time in their home.

Readers who have questions about screen time and how to handle it with their children or advice on how they have managed devices in their home are invited to send an email to The Hinsdalean at [news@thehinsdalean.com](mailto:news@thehinsdalean.com).

spend on line.

"My biggest worry is the lack of communication skills, and what I think makes up a robust, fulfilling relationship is when I'm actually with someone and we see each other smile and I can ready body language," she said.

Kids used to spend their junior high years hanging out at friends' houses, she noted.

"I watch my kids sometimes stay in their pajamas all day and they're in a group text from their bedrooms," she said. "I don't know if in their mind they are with other people."

## Technology — like TV — is here to stay

Kids have been influenced by things like movies and TV commercials and music for decades, said Kris Adzia, director of education at the Hinsdale-based Robert Crown Center for Health Education. And now they are turning to social media posts to determine which types of behavior are the norm.

"The ones that get the most likes and the most attention, a lot of times, are the most provocative, whether it's drug references and sex references," she said.

Experts stress that helping kids learn the skills to navigate this environment is critical. Hurley introduced her 9-year-old son to Common Sense Media, an app where he can check the recommended age for a new game or app.

"I'm trying to teach my child to be an informed consumer because I think that's really important in this age of technology," she said. "It is not possible for parents to keep up with every single app that comes up."

Even parents who do stay current on the all the different social media platforms their children are using don't have guaranteed cyberspace bound-

## ■ DIGITAL LIVING

*This is the first in a four-part series on the digital age and how it affects young people's mental health.*

aries.

"What we know about kids, and we've known it since the time I was a kid and before, they will find a way around it," Hurley said.

So rather than tracking kids on their iPhones, Hurley recommends working to develop an open, trusting relationship. That means learning to accept technology is here to stay.

"If you say technology is bad and it's terrible, you're not going to develop that connection. Your kids aren't going to open up to you. It's not going to be that two-way street," she said.

In addition, Hurley thinks the leaders of sports teams and other group activities might want to think about setting policies around technology, such as banning cellphone use on the bus to and from competitions or during end-of-the-year banquets.

"It can't just be on the parents and it can't just be on the schools. I think there are opportunities as a community for us to be really thoughtful about what we are modeling," Hurley said.

Technology can give parents and kids something to talk about at the dinner table — like the funny video of the cats ringing a bell for food, Wychocki said. And the family calendar app reminds son Ben of his orthodontist appointments and he and sisters Maddy and Izzy of upcoming visits with grandma.

"You have to figure out how to use the powers for good and not evil," Wychocki said.

Adzia agreed technology is not going away.

"You can't fight it," she said. "You have to help them figure out how to navigate it as a family."